

National Focus: The Influence of the Study of Ancestral History on African Americans

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ABSTRACT

American history has been an essential component of every school's curriculum. Students of all ethnic backgrounds must know and understand that their culture and history are as significant as any other. Educators must take on the task of teaching students about all ethnicities. The purpose of this article is to analyze the effects of the influence of ancestral history on African Americans.

History of All Americans

My family has an educational background that dates back to at least the 1800's. I was taught the importance of knowledge, education, and family history at a very early age. This knowledge has had a profound impact on me, as well as other relatives' educational goals. We were taught to value education.

Teaching the History of all Americans is critical to student success. Students need to know and understand who they are before they can decide where they are going. If more curriculums included the history of all represented ethnic populations, there would be more racial tolerance and understanding. Developing self-esteem and leadership skills is an important part of one's education also. Self-esteem and determination can be enhanced by the study of one's own history. Not only do students need to know who they are, but also students need to know about other people and learn to appreciate and respect differences.

Background of Porchane' A. White

The purpose of this article is to discuss the effects of acquiring knowledge of African American History on African American students. I am an African American who received an education in Beaumont, Texas Catholic and Public Schools. I was involved in the desegregation of the local high schools in Beaumont. The first year that Westbrook High School was desegregated, 1982 - 1983, was an eye-opening experience for all of the students.

I graduated from Lamar University, in Beaumont, with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Elementary Education and received a Master's degree in Educational Administration from Prairie View A&M University. I taught kindergarten for ten years and fourth grade for three years in the Beaumont Independent School District.

African American History in Schools

Dr. Kirkland Jones taught African American Literature, not history, at Lamar University. I had only one course in African American History throughout my formal school years. However, Martin Luther King Jr. would be mentioned briefly in history classes.

While teaching fourth grade, I discovered that the students had little knowledge of African American History and proceeded to expose them to it. Their history books, in the 1990's, mentioned Martin Luther King Jr. and slavery. The knowledge that students did possess came from information handed down from their relatives. The class was comprised of students of all ethnic backgrounds. They all were interested in learning about the history of African Americans as well as other ethnicities. The discussions that ensued were engaging by far and produced much critical thinking on the part of the students.

One of the goals of education should be to make a man thirst for knowledge. A teacher should attempt to keep students engaged. If this is done, students will want to participate and learn. Like the students in the class who obtained their information from relatives, my family learned of our history in the same manner.

Historical Information

Arlinnie Bell Hooks, The Red Bank Baptist Church Historian and my maternal grandmother, recorded much of the family's history. Much of the information in her reports was given by Bolden Hooks, my great grandfather and her father-in-law, the Bowie County Superintendent's Office, the Hooks Public School Journalism Class, and Mr. L.H. Griffin (Hooks, 1984).

The First One Room School

Warren Hooks, a pioneer farmer, planter, and slave owner, came to the area, now known as the town of Hooks, from Alabama in 1818. The town was named for Warren Hooks. Warren brought with him a son, by the name of Forrest, whose mother was Native American. Forrest was my great great great grandfather. Warren deeded two acres of land to Forrest to be used for a church, school, and a cemetery. The location of the land was north of Hooks at the edge of a high clay hill and because of its location the area was called Red Bank. In 2003, Red Bank Baptist Church celebrated its 137th year anniversary. The Texarkana Gazette printed an article in reference to the celebration.

The congregation, whose church is the oldest one established in the Zion District, will have special services at 3p.m. Sunday. The church was founded by the Rev. Forrest Hooks, son of Warren Hooks, the founder of Hooks. It was established in 1866. (Morrow, 2003, p. 1)

Warren taught Forrest to read, write, and count. In 1866, Forrest organized and taught the first School for African Americans in Bowie County. The schoolhouse was a small one-room building with very crude furnishings. Later another building, located in an area north of Red Bank, was used for the school. Forrest's life was threatened for educating African Americans.

Hooks Family Educators

From records found during research, many of the Hooks family members served the school in one capacity or another, including R. L Hooks who was elected teacher in 1903, A. H. Hooks who was a trustee in 1905, and B. H. Hooks a trustee in 1916. In

1915, Miss Lillian Garland taught for a salary of \$15.00 a month! In 1916, the teacher and principal both worked for \$50.00 a month.

During the year of 1924-1925, the school building was wrecked by a storm. The following year 1926-1927, school was taught in the Red Bank Church. Miss Arlinnie Bell, my grandmother, assisted the principal, Miss Louise McPeters. Teachers did janitorial work. However, the children assisted by sweeping and bringing in wood for the teachers to make the wood stove fire for the next day.

The Rosenwald Building

The next school building was built from funds called the Rosenwald Fund. This building, which consisted of two large rooms and one small room, was used for classes also. The principal was Miss Ouida Mae Smith with assistants, Arlinnie B. Hooks and Miss Mable Smith. The next year a new principal came to Red Bank School. She was Mrs. Estella E. Langston. She was assisted by Miss Mable Smith, Miss Bell, and Miss Henrietta Wyatt.

Credit for the beautification of the school grounds and the installation of much of the furniture and equipment goes to a very active P.T.A. with the help of the trustees who were among the leading citizens of the community. Those citizens include Mr. Harrison Hill, Henry Ellis, Bolden Hooks, Lucky Lomax, Marshall Davis and others. These men had interest in the growth of the school, these trustees were known as sub-trustees.

Salary

In February 1945, the salary of the First Grade Teachers was raised to \$95.00 a month. Mrs. Arlinnie Bell Hooks often stated,

With a salary like that I thought I would have so much money, I would soon be numbered as a member of the wealthy group. There were times when the yearly salary was \$480.00, and there were times when they had no salary because the district had no money to pay the teachers. Many of them worked consistently not knowing when or if they would be paid. They were usually paid with vouchers that they sold to anyone who they could get to buy them at a discount of 20% on the dollar. (Hooks, 1984)

School Improvement

As time passed the teachers, trustees, and citizens of the community saw the need for more teaching space. Mrs. Langston, Mrs. Hooks, Mrs. Corrine Crawford (Mrs. Arlinnie Bell Hooks' sister and my aunt) and Mrs. Wyatt made a loan and purchased building material to be used for adding a room to the present building. Many patrons contributed cash, time, free labor, and whatever they could to add a room to the

Rosenwald structure. Men and women gave free work after their daily fieldwork was over. Ladies came nightly and held kerosene lamps that gave light by which the men saw to do the carpentry. This gave space for P.T.A. meetings, programs, and community activities.

Under the leadership of Mrs. Gwendolyn Montgomery and the Agricultural Department of Bowie County a canning house was built. The men cut logs and did the carpentry work. The United States Government gave the material for the mattresses that each family made. The men tanned hides, made leather belts, harnesses, blinders, breeching for horses, and resoled shoes for their families. Ladies sewed, canned, raised gardens, and took part in a "Live At Home" Program. This was a program to encourage people to improve their living conditions. Red Bank and every family took part in a Neighborhood Beautification Program.

Hooks Independent School District

Red Bank was a Common School District until 1923 when it became Independent with Hooks and became District No. 44. When Burns School was destroyed by fire, Red Bank's School building was torn down and moved. It was consolidated with Burns School. Under the leadership of Superintendent L.H. Griffin, who became Superintendent of Hooks Schools in 1950, a new school was built and occupied in 1952. It was built by Lavender Construction Company at a cost of \$189,000.00. This new structure became known as Hooks Colored High School and later it was known as Kennedy High School during the school year of 1968-1969. In 1981, it became known as John F. Kennedy Junior High School (Hooks, 1984, p. 3).

Many interesting events happened during the past years, the beginning of a one teacher-one room school. When floods prevented children and teachers from returning home from school they were kept in the home of Stanley and A.B. Hooks, my grandparents, who also brought pupils to their living room for classes when the schoolrooms were too cold for comfort. Red Bank School progressed from the one teacher school to the present modern day system (Hooks, p.5).

Impact of Awareness of Family History

My maternal grandmother, a graduate of Wiley College, was a teacher for 42 years and my mother, a graduate of Prairie View A & M University, was a teacher for 37 years. I have cousins, aunts, uncles, and many other family members who are or were educators. Many of them attended Prairie View A & M University and Lamar University. One of my uncle's, Ernest Bell, taught at Prairie View A & M University during the summers. He was the first African American to teach at a local High School in Texarkana, Texas. Texarkana recently named a city park after him. Many of the Hooks/Bell family descendants work in various fields. They are engineers, teachers, nurses, physical therapists, and so forth.

Learning of my family's history had an immense effect on me. I learned of a history that was not taught in books and would not have known about that history had it not been for my family members. Not only did they tell me about my family, they also made sure that I was knowledgeable about the history of African Americans and other ethnicities as well. Students often feel that they are not important or that others do not see them as significant because their people are not mentioned in textbooks and if they are mentioned it is very briefly.

Change in Curriculum

Philadelphia public schools have mandated that students take a course in African American History in order to graduate (Fund, 2005, p. 2). The theory is that African American students will become aware of their culture and gain self-esteem. Students will become confident and will therefore show improvement in the academic arena. Those who are not African American can gain an appreciation for the culture. James Baldwin, a noted novelist of the 1960's, once testified before congress stating that, "the triumphs, trials, and tribulations of African Americans should be woven into American History instead of taught in isolation" (Fund, 2005). This would be a response to the critics who say that we should teach only American History. African American History is a part of American History.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, it is essentially important that the history of all represented ethnicities is taught in schools. Students need to be shown that there is more to the world than just their immediate and present surroundings. They need to understand that their families are a part of history also. We must educate, motivate, lead, guide, and teach to all races of people. It is our responsibility to make sure that all students have the necessary knowledge, which includes the history of their people, to compete in the world today.

References

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